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ABSTRACT

Pointing out that student testing in literature should take into account each school's philosophy concerning the literature curriculum, this digest explores the broad domain of literature study and looks at specific objectives and outcomes in literature testing. The digest discusses answers to the following questions: (1) Where are the broad thrusts of the curriculum in literature? (2) How can the content and objectives of the literature curriculum be specified? (3) How are test questions developed? and (4) How is student performance judged? A chart of content areas and behaviors accompanies the text. (EL)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

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Testing in Literature

Importance of the Question

Recently there has been increasing attention to testing of writing and reading, but no parallel growth of interest in testing of literature. This is unfortunate, not only because testing affects curriculum but also because attention to the testing of literature can help teachers, English curriculum specialists, test makers, and teacher educators refine their understanding of literature and the way it is taught.

In order to examine the domain of literature study and to suggest ways by which teachers might advance their own testing, one should look first at the broad domain of literature and then at more specific objectives and school outcomes. This process is necessary because literature curricula, even in neighboring schools, may well have quite different philosophies, and testing of student performance must take those differences into account.

Where Are the Broad Thrusts of the Curriculum in Literature?

In the United States, as around the world, there is no commonly shared view about a single broad aim of instruction in literature, although there is general consensus as to the range of major thrusts which differentiate one curriculum from another. Although these thrusts have been given slightly different labels, the definitions are stable: one literature curriculum focuses on texts and knowledge of the literary and cultural heritage of a group; a second focuses on the development of skilled readers and critics of literary texts; and a third focuses on the encouragement of personal growth through reading and involvement with the text (Dixon 1966; Purves 1978; Mandel 1980). In any one school or department, the actual curriculum may be a hybrid of two or even all three of the thrusts, or the thrust may vary depending on the trace or level of the student.

The implications of the three thrusts for testing are clear; no single test can cover all three. The first calls for measures of recall, the second for measures of skill, and the third for measures of attitude. Literature teachers in a school system, therefore, should first define the broad goals of the literature curriculum as it exists by examining the course of study, the textbooks and other materials, and the kinds of assignments required of the students.

How Can the Content and Objectives of the Literature Curriculum Be Specified?

One way of performing this examination of the curriculum is to set forth the content of the curriculum and the kinds of behaviors or activities emphasized in a grid (See Figure 1). Various curricula would make different applications of the principle of the grid and therefore different detailings of the content and behavior. From any grid, the crucial next step is to determine the emphasis of the curriculum for each cell. An historically based curriculum would probably stress knowledge of specific texts, and contextual (background) and cultural information. A more analytic curriculum would stress application of critical terminology and expression of a preferred response. Determining the relative emphasis of the various cells in the curriculum then leads to the development of a set of test specifications.

Behavior	Specific literary texts	Contextual information	Literary theory	Cultural information
A. Be familiar with				
B. Apply knowledge of specific literary texts to				
C. Apply literary history to				
D. Apply literary theory to				
E. Apply cultural information to				
F. Respond to				
G. Express a pattern of preference for				
H. Express a response to				
I. Express a consistent pattern of responses to				
J. Have positive attitudes and interests in literature.				

Figure 1. Grid of content areas and behaviors.

How Are Test Questions Developed?

Once the curriculum has been analyzed, and once the various aspects of the domain of literature study that are considered important in a school or class have been determined, the next step is to develop a set of test specifications for that domain. These specifications would include, for each cell to be measured, a clear statement of what the cell means, perhaps with examples; a statement of what type of measure (such as a true-false test, a series of essays, a performance, or a set of out-of-class activities) would best let an observer know what the

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students are doing with respect to that cell; and the criteria by which adequate or superior performance would be determined. Such specification would then lead to the development of tests, questionnaires, and other measures that would indicate what the students have gained. The purpose of such specification is primarily to insure the fairness of the testing and the probability of comparable tests from semester to semester or year to year. In many institutions, these test specifications are made available to the students so that they are not surprised by the actual test or performance, and they can better prepare.

These specifications and the resultant tests need to be examined carefully to see whether the testing modes are appropriate to the emphasis in the cells. For example, if the cell to be emphasized is that of expressing a response to a piece of literature, it would make little sense to develop an elaborate true-false or multiple-choice test; the emphasis of that cell is on expression, perhaps written, perhaps oral, perhaps dramatic. Similarly, an out-of-class essay on a play is not a good way of testing whether students can recall various characters, scenes, and lines in the play. In general, behaviors like recognition, recall, and even application are efficiently tested through highly structured approaches such as true-false or short answer. Behaviors that call for expression require more extensive measures that ask students to classify, analyze, interpret, or evaluate texts. In general, too, the measures of these higher abilities should use texts that are relatively unfamiliar to the student rather than texts extensively taught in class. With the previously taught text, there is a greater possibility that the student is recalling class discussion or notes rather than exercising a set of analytic or interpretive skills.

How Is Student Performance Judged?

The final aspect of testing—scoring or judging and then reporting student performance—is often the most difficult, particularly if more elaborate measures are used. It is one thing to total up a number of right answers; quite another to rate a piece of writing on the character of *Stuart Little;* still another to judge individual performance in a dramatic interpretation of a Winnie the Pooh story. In the latter cases, judgments are being made about the rhetorical or dramatic skills of the students as well as their knowledge or understanding of the text.

For the composition, many teachers seek to rate the quality of content and the use of evidence and reasoning, separate from rating the structure, style, and mechanics of the writing. The latter aspects are important, to be sure, but as far as performance in literature is concerned, it is the former that counts. Similarly, in dramatic interpretation the students' understanding of the characters and the dramatic situation should be rated separately from their skills in speaking, gesturing, and the like. Research indicates that the ratings of various aspects of performance are related to each other, but that raters aware of the relationships can make distinctions between the content and the form of a written or dramatic performance. For an overall grade in language arts, of course, teachers might want to combine the two, but for the literature aspect of the grade, the content is important.

Finally, some of the objectives of the literature curriculum are not subject to judgment as to good or bad, but simply to description by the teacher. These objectives concern attitudes about and interest in literature and literature instruction. It is extremely important for these aspects to be measured through some sort of questionnaire or informal interview, but the results might well reflect less upon the student than upon the teacher and the curriculum. Curriculum makers and teachers should consider the possibility that a literature course may produce students who are more knowledgeable but who do not want to read literature, or the course may produce students who love literature but have not learned anything. Ideally, the objectives in literature instruction should form a harmonious whole.

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